Sessions Adopts Defiant Stance

FBI Chief Vows to Stay On Unless President Says Go

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FBI Director William S. Sessions said yesterday that as a "matter of principle" he will not step down without a direct request from President Clinton, setting the stage for a showdown over his tenure that could come as early as today.

Sessions's defiant comments, made as he checked out of a Northwest Washington hospital after treatment for a broken elbow, appeared to be a flat rejection of Attorney General Janet Reno's request for his resignation by early this week. It also appeared to leave the White House with little choice but to fire the FBI director—a move presidential aides have been seeking for months to avoid.

"It's a matter of principle," Sessions told the Associated Press as he left Sibley Memorial Hospital yesterday. "It's a matter of being certain that everybody understands across the world and across the nation that this director is not guilty of unethical or improper conduct and that the bureau must not be anything other than an independent agency."

The only circumstance under which he would resign, Sessions added, would be were "the president to say, 'I want to replace you.' If he does it, I've gone all the way with the bureau and I know that I've done my job."

At the same time, the director's wife, Alice Sessions, stepped up her charges against unnamed veteran FBI agents who she contends have been plotting to oust her husband. Accompanying Sessions as he left the hospital, she said those agents had fed false information of ethical abuses to the Justice Department—an accusation that infuriated department officials, who categorized them as "wild" and "nonsense."

Sessions—who has been under a cloud for months because of internal Justice Department findings of ethical lapses—told aides he would report to work for a "normal schedule" today, according to a source close to the director. He had been scheduled to fly to Ala-

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bama to attend an FBI training session for local law enforcement officers, but was forced to cancel the trip after he stumbled over a curb leaving his meeting with Reno on Saturday and broke his elbow. After spending Saturday evening in the hospital, he was released yesterday morning with his right arm in a cast.

A White House spokesman declined to comment on Sessions's remarks, saying "Everything is on hold until Monday, that is the deadline." Asked if the president was ready to fire Sessions then, the spokesman said, "I can't tell you if the president is going to actually do that," adding that aides were still talking about how to handle the matter of his removal.

Sessions has been under fire since January, when a report by the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility concluded that he had committed numerous ethical infractions and abuses. They included findings that Sessions used FBI aircraft for personal trips to visit relatives, avoided paying incomes taxes on his FBI limousine service to and from work, and improperly used government money to install a $10,000 security fence around his residence.

Sessions's comments yesterday reflected his frequently expressed conviction that the charges against him were essentially cooked up by a cabal of agents within the FBI and by Bush administration officials who were intent on removing him in what he viewed as an attempted "coup." Alice Sessions expanded on that yesterday, with her accusation of FBI agents feeding false information to OPR.

"They have blackened the reputation of a man who never had a mar on his reputation," she said, according to the Associated Press. "Without that report, there would never have been any talk about the president replacing him."

Dismissing her accusation, a Justice Department official said that more than 100 FBI agents had been interviewed under oath for the OPR report. "Everything in there was corroborated one way or another, either by documentary evidence or the testimony of others," the official said.

The official also noted that the original charges against Sessions came not from FBI agents but from a journalist, Ronald Kessler, who, for a book he is writing on the FBI, had been granted extraordinary access to bureau officials by Sessions.

Administration officials, in comments over the weekend, said that although Clinton and Reno concluded months ago that Sessions would have to leave, they were reluctant simply to fire him. In part, this reflected the view of senior administration officials that at least some of the charges against Sessions were unfair or exaggerated and that, in other respects, he had been a good director, bringing more minorities into the agency and curbing investigative abuses of the past.

But in recent weeks, senior Justice Department and White House officials have lost patience with Sessions, these sources said. Rebuffing all attempts to arrange a "graceful" exit, Sessions has refused to cooperate, insisting at one point that he would not step down until a successor is confirmed by the Senate—a process that could take months. Administration officials viewed it as a strategy essentially aimed at ensuring that FBI Deputy Director Floyd Clarke, who Sessions believes has betrayed him, would not serve on a temporary basis as head of the FBI.

Administration officials also had been hoping to coordinate Sessions's removal with at least the nomination of a successor, and toward that end, Clinton interviewed U.S. District Judge Louis Freeh at the White House on Friday night. But while Freeh was described over the weekend as the leading contender for the job, officials indicated that picking a successor may no longer matter and they simply want Sessions removed as quickly as possible.